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Conference Abstract

# Establishing Legal Title for Non-Accessioned Collections: All Collections Matter

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## Abstract

The Education and Outreach (E&O) Collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) contains around 125,000 specimens and objects representing all seven of NMNH's research departments: Anthropology, Botany, Entomology, Invertebrate Zoology, Mineral Sciences, Paleobiology, and Vertebrate Zoology. The primary source of the E&O Collection is the NMNH's former Naturalist Center (NC) that began in 1976 and closed in 2011. Almost a year after the NC's closure, the Collection was repurposed as the core of the E&O Collection for the new science learning center, Q?rius, at NMNH. The E&O Collection was designated a collecting unit that needed to meet the Smithsonian Institution's standards of care, holding non-accessioned collections to the same principles as accessioned collections.

For museums to claim full legal title, all acquired collections require proof of offer from the donor, acceptance by the museum, and physical custody of the objects. Title status is necessary to comply with the exceptions and regulations surrounding intellectual property rights and to fulfill legal and ethical obligations. E&O collection items derived from several different sources, including donations, purchases, exchanges, collecting trips, and most commonly from former NC docents who routinely deposited items into the Collection.

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At the start of 2013, the E&O Collection's team along with graduate-level interns from The George Washington University began the legal title project for the E&O Collection. In order to ensure that NMNH holds full title to the E&O Collection, interns research original acquisition records and federal and international regulations on cultural and biological materials. In 2016, through the Collections Care Preservation Fund, a contractor was hired to: 1) create a comprehensive digital and paper record to re-enforce the integrity of the non-accessioned collections and their future actions for exhibition, loan, or disposal, and 2) conduct thorough research and review of collection items' acquisition histories to record that NMNH has done its due diligence to understand what is in the E&O Collection and how it arrived there.

Over the past five years, we have investigated legal title for over 9,000 collection lots and worked with over 44 interns. We have digitized over 1,097 transaction records and have linked over 20,090 catalog records to a transaction. Ultimately, the E&O legal title research process ensures collection items have full legal title, mitigates risk of losing collection data by digitizing acquisition records and legal title research, and promotes best practices for acquired but not accessioned education collections.

## Keywords

legal title, permits, database, data, collections management system, Electronic Museum (EMu), education, non-accessioned, acquisition, natural history, best practices' federal regulations, international regulations

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